DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 102 471 CG 009 566

AUTHOR	Knox, David; Gilman, Richard C.
TITLE	The First Year of Fatherhood.
SPONS AGENCY	East Carolina Univ., Greenville, N.C.
PUB DATE	Oct 74
NOTE	13p.; Paper presented at the National Council on Family Relations (St. Louis, Missouri, October 1974)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS	Behavior Change; *Child Rearing; *Fathers; *Parent Attitudes; Parent Participation; Parent Reaction; Questionnaires; Research Projects; *Role Theory; *Sex Role
IDENTIFIERS	*Parenting

ABSTRACT

One hundred and two first-time fathers responded to a questionnaire regarding their preparation for and adaptation to fatherhood. Most fathers had little preparation for their role and participated minimally in the day-to-day care of their new baby. Wanting to return to the pre-baby days was significantly related to the wife's complaining about the baby, going out as a couple less often after the baby than before the baby's birth, and feeling that the marriage was worse. The conclusions suggest that wives still shoulder the major responsibility for parenthood and that their reaction has considerable influence on the father's adjustment. (Author)

ED102471

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

THE FIRST YEAR OF FATHERHOOD*

David Knox and Richard C. Gilman**

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

*The authors would like to express their appreciation to Mrs. Terry Lawler for her cooperation in making available the birth certificates of the Pitt County Hospital, Greenville, North Carolina and to Charles Garrison, Yoon Kim, Paul Tschetter, and Buford Rhea for their assistance in developing the questionnaire. This research was supported through a grant from the Research Council of East Carolina University and was presented at the National Council on Family Relations, St. Louis, Missouri, October, 1974 by the first author.

** David Knox, Ph.D. and Richard C. Gilman, Ph.D. are Associate Professors of Sociology, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina 27834.

CG 009 566

The First Year of Fatherhood

One-hundred and two first-time fathers responded to a questionnaire regarding their preparation for and adaptation to fatherhood. Most fathers had little preparation for their role and participated minimally in the day-to-day care of their new baby. Wanting to return to the pre-baby days was significantly related to the wife's complaining about the baby, going out as a couple less often after the baby than before the baby's birth, and feeling that the marriage was worse. The conclusions suggest that wives still shoulder the major responsibility for parenthood and that their reaction has considerable influence on the father's adjustment.

Introduction

With the exception of research articles by Garner (1943), Tasch (1952), Hobbs (1968), Nydegger (1973), Russell (1974), and books by Benson (1968) and Biller and Meredith (1975) the literature in marriage and the family reflects a predominant interest in mothers and children. Since there has been an increased cultural emphasis on the role sharing of child rearing responsibilities, a general assessment of how fathers

respond to and are affected by babies seems warranted. The research addresses itself to three questions: 1) How does a male prepare for parenthood and participate in the care of the new baby?, 2) How does a father feel towards his new baby?, and 3) How does the baby affect the marriage, in-laws, and parental relationships as perceived by the father?

Sample

All first-time fathers (382) of legitimate babies born (neonatal deaths excluded) in the Pitt County Hospital, Greenville, North Carolina, between April, 1973, and March, 1974, were mailed a 43-item questionnaire. One-hundred and two usable questionnaires were returned (28%). Postcards and phone calls were, generally, not effective in increasing the response rate. Although the questions were sent to an equal number of Blacks and Whites, the responding fathers were predominantly White (93%), had a mean age of 30, and had been fathers for an average of 26 weeks. Because of the disproportionate return of the questionnaires from Blacks, the data will reflect the White respondents only.

Findings and Discussion

Preparation for Fatherhood and Care of the Baby

Although parenthood preparation classes at East Carolina University were available for 98% (2% lived too far away or worked at night) of the fathers, only 1/3 actually attended. Lamaze classes were also available for 98% of the respondents, yet only 1/4 attended. Hence, most of these fathers did not take advantage of those opportunities to increase their socialization into the fatherhood role.

In regard to baby care, fathers (of bottle-fed babies) fed their babies an average of five times per week and changed diapers an average of six times per week. A six-month-old baby requires feeding and changing about four and six times daily respectively.

Reasons for infrequent participation by fathers in both pre-and-postnatal conditions vary. Parents, peers, and the economic system help to insure that males will have little preparation for the fatherhood role and that their participation will be minimal. Since little boys are loved for what they will become (girls are loved for what they are), parents toss footballs into their hands, symbolic of the competitive and ruthless economic struggle they must enter. Middle-class males are encouraged to attend the right school and enter the

right profession (professional or business career) (Aberle and Naegele, 1952). The focus of male socialization is economic survival, not rearing children.

Peers avoid socializing males for fatherhood in another way. Adolescent males are taught to think of marriage in terms of continued sexual access. Ehrmann (1959) observed that boys are attracted to romanticism in adolescence only after developing a strong erotic orientation in their relations with girls. Hence, marriage has a sex-linked component for males. While the average teenage boy is thinking erotic thoughts, the girl daydreams about her future husband and the children she will "someday" have. When the male discovers that his companion and sex partner is enamoured with an eight-pound baby, the distinction between "marriage" and the "family" becomes more clear.

The economic system does little to encourage the young father toward active participation in the care of his children. Rather, the father is paid money to spend time away from his children. He is rewarded for his career efforts, not for being a good father. Salary increases, promotions, and transfers are contingent on increased job productivity, not reading Peter Pan stories and playing pin the tail on the

donkey. Benson (1968) notes that males are more involved in their work role than in the parent role because they have a superior to react to in the occupational role.

Attitude Toward Baby

Although the respondents had little preparation and were minimally involved in the day-to-day care of their babies, all reported positive feelings for their baby. While 15% of the fathers described their feelings as "love," 85% said, "Love plus extreme happiness." These descriptions may be distorted since 25% of the sample also said, "Sometimes I wish my wife and I could return to the time before the baby was born." In addition, 40% agreed with the statement, "My feelings (about the baby) have changed since the baby was born" although only 6% stated how (they reported a positive change).

It is also probable that many of the fathers who did not return their questionnaire felt negatively about their babies. Russell (1974) observed that the non-respondents in her parenthood study tended to be the early married, less educated, and premaritally pregnant. All of these factors are associated with perceiving parenthood as a crisis event.

The tendency to give only socially desirable answers (Edmonds, 1967; Edmonds, Withers, and DiBatista, 1972) may also help to account for the fact that no respondent selected

"mild positive feelings," "indifference," or "mild negative feelings" as a description of his personal feelings toward his baby.

Effect on Marriage, In-Laws, and Parental Relationships

Although most fathers (75%) said that their baby had no effect on their marriage, twenty percent indicated that their marital relationship had "improved" since the baby, and three percent reported that their relationship had become worse.

The effect of the baby on the in-law and parental relationships followed the same pattern. Most (85%) said that the relationships had not changed since the baby. Ten percent reported that the relationships had improved.

Other studies agree that fatherhood is not a particularly upsetting event for fathers. Hobbs (1968) observed that "not one of 53 fathers would use the phrase 'extensive or severe crisis' to describe his first experience with parenthood." Russell (1974) reported that fatherhood was only a slight or moderate crisis event (described as a change of self, spouse, or relationship with significant others which the person defines as 'bothersome') for 272 first-time fathers. On the other hand, parenthood as a crisis event was reported by 83% of LeMaster's (1957) couples and by 53% of Dyer's (1963) couples.

Variables Related to Difficulty with Fatherhood

While only two percent of the fathers said that they wished a return to pre-baby days "a great deal," twenty-five percent reported that they "occasionally" wished a return. Using this item as the dependent variable, 30 independent variables were tested using Chi-square as the test for independence with .05 as the minimum acceptable significance level. Gamma was used to describe the strength of the relationship. Among the unrelated variables were: Baby's age and sex, planned baby, participation in parenthood classes, participation in Lamaze classes, experience in caring for babies, talking with males about babies, the wife having help (in-laws, parents, paid help) during the first few days or weeks after returning from the hospital, the father's active participation in feeding the baby and changing the diapers, a baby with colic, working wife, religion, baby sleeping in the same room with parents, age of father, years married, and race.

Three variables were significant. Those fathers whose

PLACE TABLE I HERE

---

wives complained about the baby, who went out alone with their

wives less often, and who felt that their marriage had deteriorated since the baby, tended to wish a return to the time before the baby was born. These findings emphasize the importance of the marital relationship in the father's adjustment to parenthood. A complaining wife is almost incompatible, by definition, with marriage happiness. Likewise, since infants have a tremendous capacity to interrupt and decrease adult interaction (Feldman and Rogoff, 1967), spouses who secure a babysitter and get away together (alone) insure a time to feed and nurture their own relationship. When these times of sharing do not occur, the marriage may begin to suffer and the father wishes to return to the pre-baby marriage.

Summary and Conclusion

This research attempted to assess the reactions of husbands to their first year of fatherhood. Although preparation for these respondents was minimal, their evaluation of parenthood was, generally, very favorable. Marital, parental, and in-law relationships were either not affected or improved.

Personal dissatisfaction with parenthood was associated with a complaining wife, a reduction in social time with the wife, and the evaluation that the marriage was worse.

These data suggest that males adapt to fatherhood with relative ease independent of any formal preparation and that their reaction is closely influenced by the adaptation of the wife. These data should also be regarded with extreme caution since only 1/4 of those who were mailed a questionnaire completed and returned the questionnaire. According to Russell (1974), the non-respondents tend to view the variable under consideration from a negative perspective.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aberle, D. F. and Naegele, K. D. Middle-class fathers occupational role and attitudes toward children. Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 1952, 22, 366-378.

Benson, L. Fatherhood: A Sociological Perspective. New York: Random House, 1968.

Edmonds, V. H. Marital conventionalization: Definition and measurement. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 1967, 29, 681-688.

Feldman, H. and Rogoff, M. Correlates of change in marital satisfaction with the birth of the first child. Unpublished paper, Department of Child Development and Family Relations, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1967.

Gardner, L. P. A survey of the attitudes and activities of fathers. The Journal of Genetic Psychology, 1943, 63, 15-53.

Hobbs, D. F. Transition to parenthood: A replication and an extension. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 1968, 30, 413-417.

Nydegger, C. N. Timing of fatherhood: Role perception and socialization. Unpublished dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1973.

Russell, C. S. Transition to parenthood: Problems and gratifications. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 1974, 36, 294-301.

Tasch, R. J. The role of the father in the family. Journal of Experimental Education, 1952, 20, 319-361.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

TABLE I

VARIABLES ASSOCIATED WITH FATHERS WANTING TO RETURN TO TIME BEFORE BABY WAS BORN

	x^2	p	gamma
Wife complains	2.93	.052	.426
Out less often	6.63	.005	.586
Marriage worse	12.27	.002	.803